

Pro-Chancellor,

Sophie Cook is an RAF veteran, writer, speaker and broadcaster, who became the first transgender woman to work in football's Premier League as club photographer for AFC Bournemouth. Today, she draws on her experiences to raise awareness of diversity and inclusion and to campaign for improved mental health care.

As a child growing up in Bournemouth, Sophie – who was born as Steve – felt a deep sense of confusion and dislocation. It wasn't until early adulthood that Steve realised this profound unease stemmed from severe gender dysphoria. Identifying as a female imprisoned in a male body, he suffered serious bouts of depression and addiction. In his early thirties, Steve made the decision to transition, undergoing hormone therapy and attending a gender identity clinic. However, a life-changing event unexpectedly caused him to re-evaluate his priorities and he abandoned all plans to live as a woman. Over the next 15 years, Steve struggled to function as a husband, father and son and has spoken candidly about having daily suicidal thoughts. In 2015, while working as AFC Bournemouth's official photographer, he overcame personal obstacles and revived the transition process to become Sophie.

Sophie recalls the moment she came out to her colleagues at the football club, and particularly the support she received from the manager and players. Spurred on by these experiences, she has since used her public platform to help and empower others. Over the past four years she has become Europe's first trans newscaster, hosted her own TV and radio chat shows, and even run for Parliament. Sophie delivers keynote speeches and workshops for schools, universities and major corporations, and has now launched the Sophie Cook Foundation to expand the educational focus of her work. Her autobiography, entitled 'Not Today: How I Chose Life', has become a self-help book for people struggling with their mental health and identity.

Sophie's message to today's graduates is to be compassionate towards yourselves and each other. While there will be successes and failures ahead, work hard to celebrate the successes and do not let the failures define you.

Pro-Chancellor, I have the honour to present Sophie Cook and I ask you to confer upon her the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*.